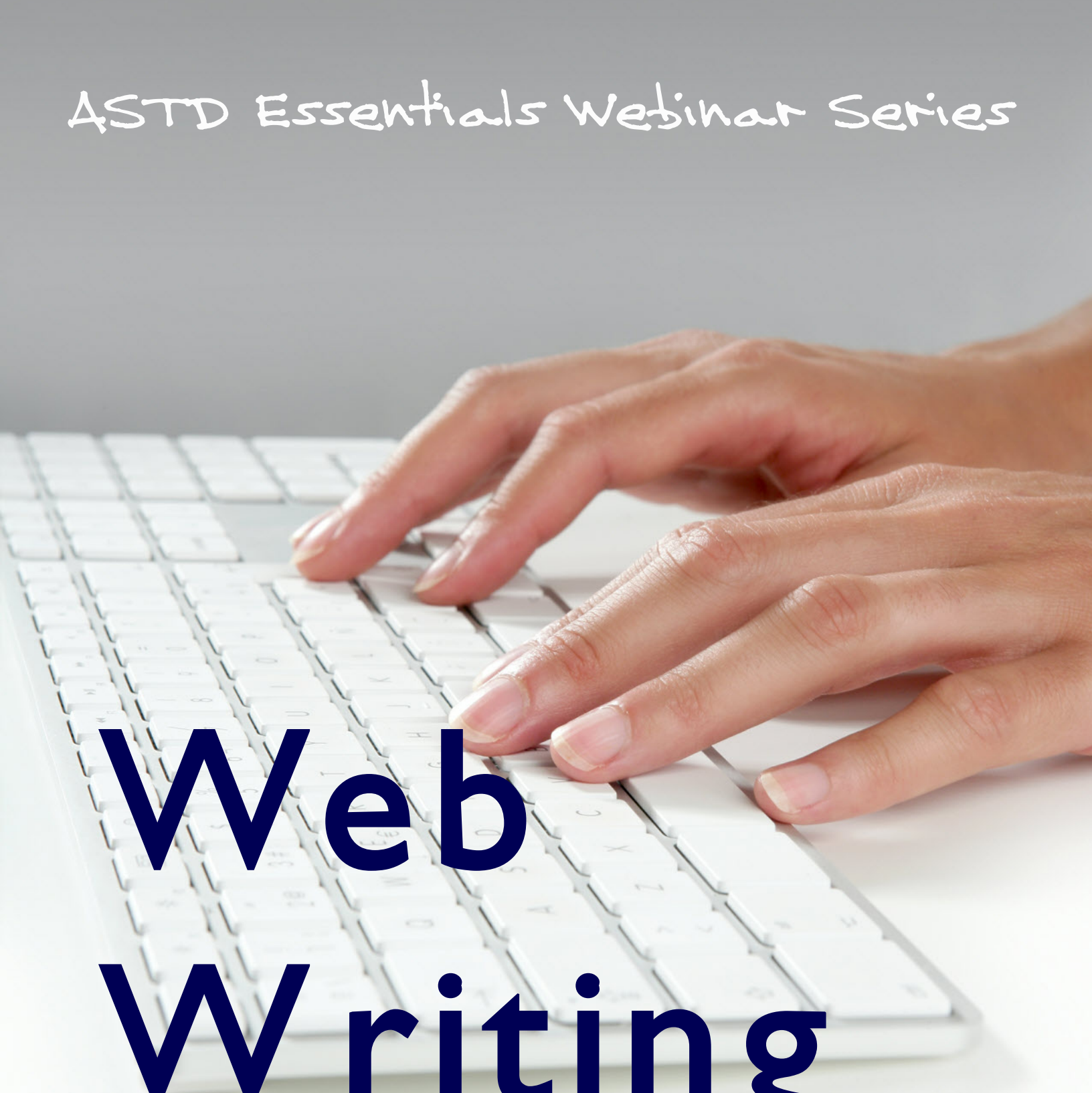
ASTD Essentials Webinar Series



Web Writing

for trainers

jonathanhalls.net
SPEAKER | WRITER | TRAINER

ASTD
WORKPLACE LEARNING & PERFORMANCE

Web writing

By now you have probably realized that media writing follows a different set of rules to those you were taught in school.

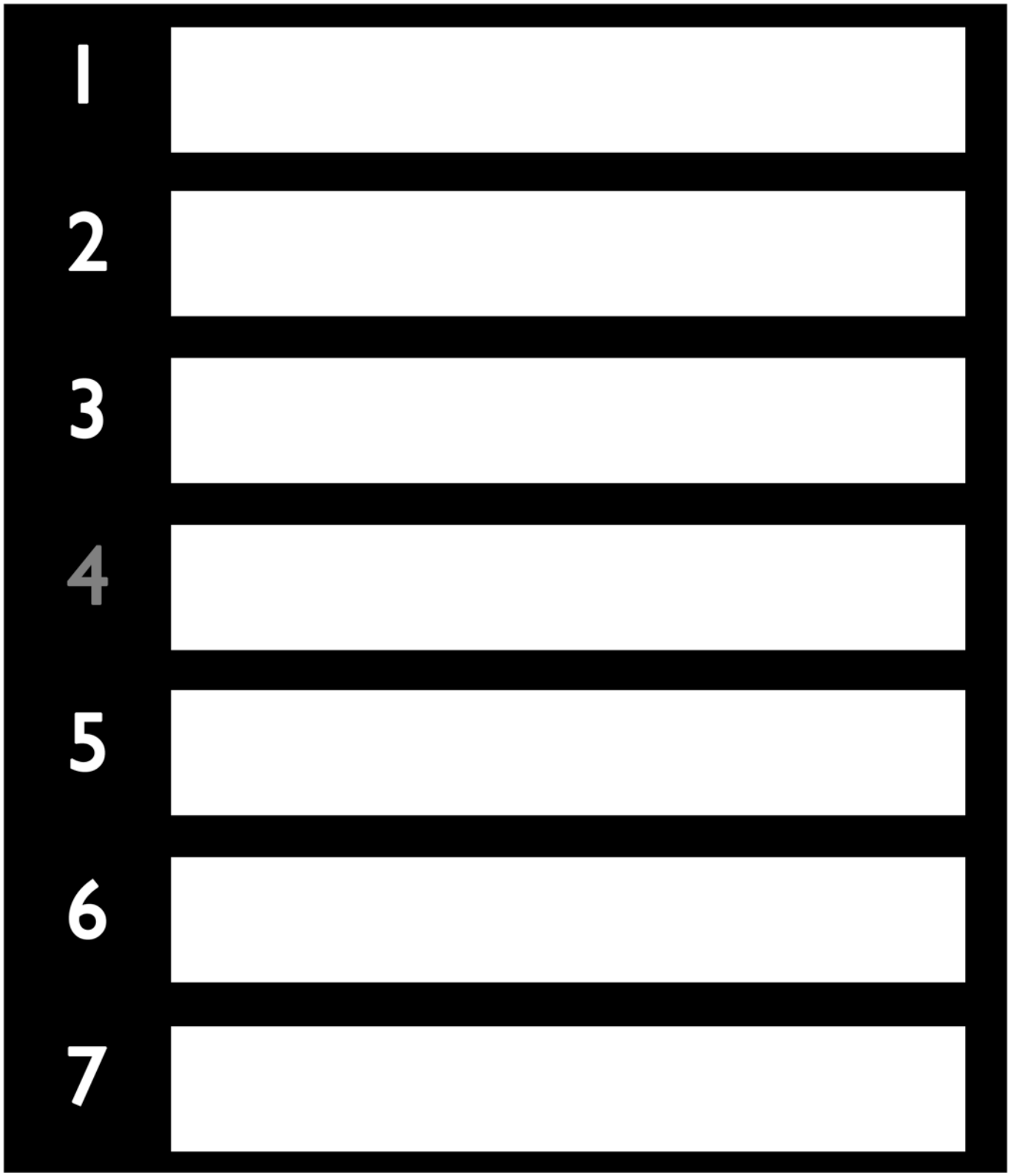
For example, when you write for the ear, the informal language you were not allowed to use in school essays turns out to be more effective. And the flowery adjectives with multiple syllables that Miss Jones encouraged in your creative writing class are decidedly unwelcome.

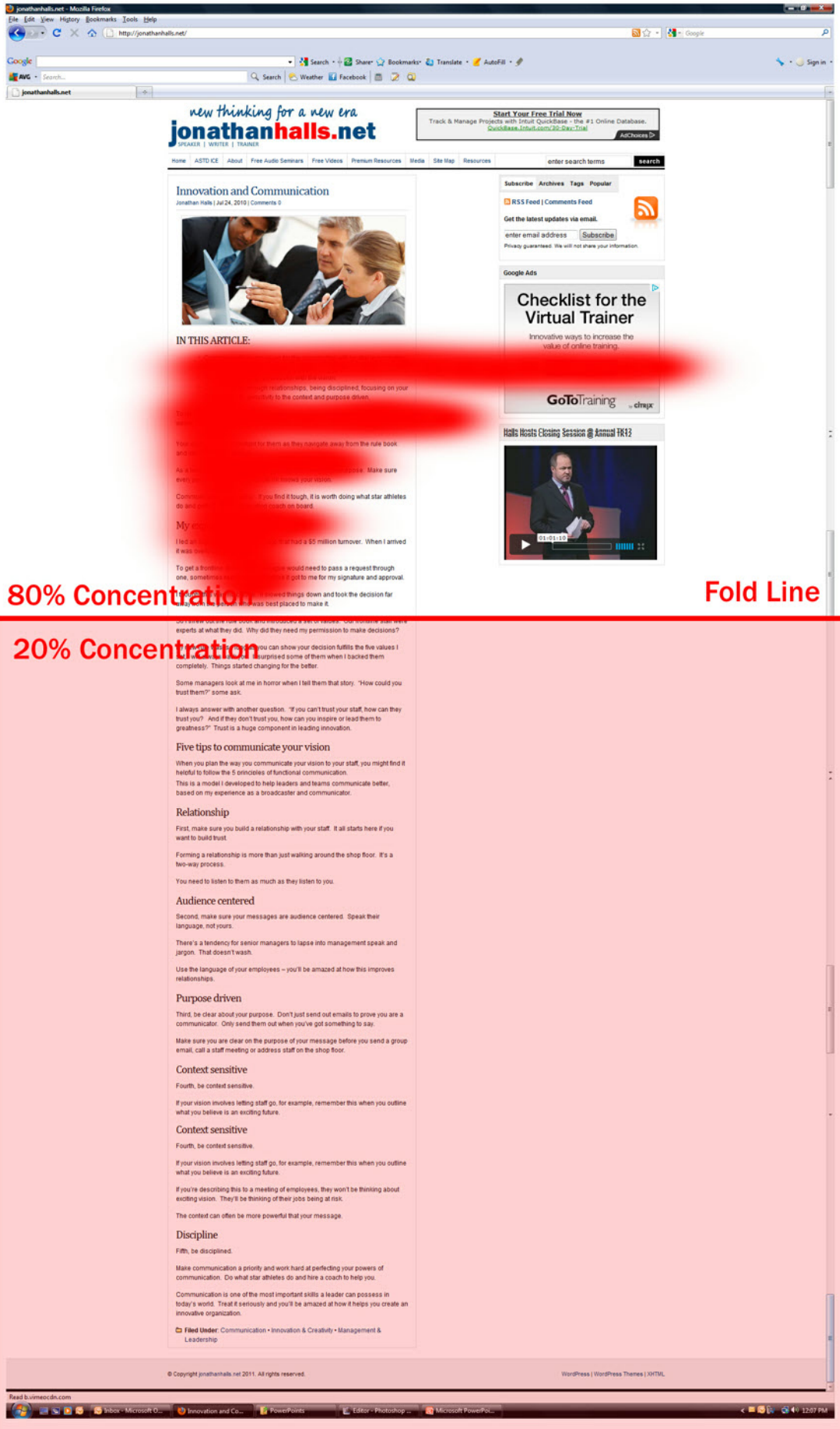
The reason for this is that media is more about being understood quickly and easily than self expression. Fancy words that send readers scurrying for their dictionary are fine if you're writing poetry. But not media.

Media communication is about being understood easily. And quickly. It's about using the most effective and efficient method you can find to get your message across. That does not mean that good grammar is evil. And when it comes to web text you have less leeway to break traditional grammar as you do in audio or video.

But it does mean you'll evaluate your writing following a different set of principles. When it comes to web writing, these principles focus more on style because web reading has both a visual and linguistic component.

QUICK QUIZ




80% Concentration
Fold Line
20% Concentration

Visual Issues

Eye Movement

Concentration

Fonts

Colors

Paragraphs

Sentences

Words

Headings

Lists

Structure

Interactive Text

Just in Time Nuggets

Didactic Learning

Blogs

Wikis

Next Steps

We started out by discussing the difference between communication and learning. Both are – in my words –about creating shared understanding.

However, learning takes this one step further. Learning makes that thing we've understood memorable and applies it. So learning is about understanding, memory and application.

When I was a learning executive, I used to remind my trainers that learning professionals are professional learners.

That's because trainers understand the process of learning and engage in critical reflection as they help others learn. Engaging in critical reflection to remember and apply what we've understood should therefore be intuitive.

So it's natural we finish our time together with a few moments of critical reflection. What have you learned over the past few webinars? What will you go out and apply tomorrow? Or next week?

We're going to break into groups. Spend a few moments with another member of the webinar cohort and discuss the following questions as they apply to you.

Please note, these questions are not about how much or how little you liked the webinar or its content. They are about you and your practice as a learning professional.

What aspect of multimedia can you implement into your current practice?

What aspect of multimedia can you change about your current practice?

What is the most important thing you can do to implement multimedia learning?

RESOURCES

Further Resources

TOP TIPS FOR

1. Always ask yourself the million dollar question: can I make this text quicker and easier for my reader to understand? Your reader is not reading your text as if she is reading a user manual, newspaper or magazine. She's in a hurry and wants your information fast.

2. Plan first and write second. You will save time if you plan the structure before stringing words and sentences together. Amending text takes longer than writing it correctly in the first place. Planning also makes it easier to see your structure and ensure each point follows a logical sequence.

3. Write short paragraphs. Follow the rule, "one idea per paragraph'. Short paragraphs are not just important because they order your points neatly. They also break up heavy blocks of text which surfers tend to skip over.

4. Write short sentences. Long sentences slow down comprehension. And many people don't read to the end of a sentence.

5. Choose simple words. You can identify simple words by asking, "Is this word quick and easy for my reader to recognize and understand?" Someone scurrying to their dictionary for a definition means you've lost the battle. One caveat though. I'm not suggesting you use simplistic words. Just simple ones.

6. Use headings and sub headings to guide your reader through your article. Headings perform two functions. First they're editorial in

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WEB WRITING

that they sum up the text that follows the heading. Second, they're navigational in that they help readers find the section of your article that's most relevant to them.

7. Summarize your story in the first paragraph. Readers need to know in the first ten seconds whether your article or instructional piece is relevant to their needs. In the learning context, we summarize an article for much the same reason we give learners an outline of our training seminar at the beginning of a class.

8. Use lists and tables to break up complex information. Remember that people consume information on the Web quickly and visually. If you can arrange a set of data in a list or table, you'll make it quicker and easier for your reader.

9. Think function not form. We were all taught in grade school to write creatively. Web text is not creative writing. It's a functional form of communication that is about getting your message across quickly and easily.

10. Think multimedia. Web text is not the only method of communication you have in this exciting new platform. You also have audio and video. Each of these methods has its own set of strengths and weaknesses as a communication method. Each works better for different types of messages. Learn these and use text when it's a better way to convey your message than audio or video.

TOP

TIPS FOR

1. Audio is not about you. It's about your listener. So make sure you don't fall into the trap of creating content that primarily meets your interests. Interview people your listener wants to hear. Use music your listener likes. Talk on topics your listener is interested in.

2. Build a relationship with your listener. Out of audio, video and text, audio is the most personal. A good presenter makes her listener feel as if she's talking directly to him. While there are many ways you can do this, start by talking in your listener's language.

3. Keep your podcast short. The skill of keeping a listener's concentration for more than a few minutes takes considerable training and practice. If you are long-winded or lack focus, you can be sure your listener will tune out. I recommend you shoot for three to five minutes per topic.

4. Write a script. I was taught as a novice broadcaster that the best adlibs were scripted. Scripts are great because they force you to think through what you're going to say ahead of taking the microphone. And they allow your brain to focus more on your presentation and how you sound than figure out what to say next.

5. Speak conversationally. Because audio is a personal method of communication, avoid being too formal. Write your scripts as if you are having a conversation with your listener. Visualize her/him as you write and use the words and phrasing you're likely to use if you were having a conversation in a pub or coffee shop.

6. Speak one to one. This is the most important thing I learned in my early training. Listeners don't gather around the radio in groups of

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five or six to listen to you. Yes, this is obvious but many podcasters still don't get it. People listen on their own. Every time you refer to your listener as "all of you" or "my audience" you're shattering any hope of a personal relationship.

7. Audio doesn't convey facts and figures very well. It's best for narrative-based messages. So avoid lists of facts and instead tell stories. If you have to convey as series of facts or dry information like new HR policy, structure the content as narrative. (This is why finance and business is best reported in newspapers than on radio or TV.)

8. Don't be a 'one hit wonder'. It's easy to churn out one or two podcasts. But if you want to make a decent run of using podcasting for learning, marketing or general communication, aim to do a series. If you do, make sure each episode is consistent in terms of content and its general feel. And rather than cram everything in at once, focus on a different topic for each episode.

9. If you're running a podcast series, save yourself some time and develop a format to follow for each episode. Also use the same intro/outro music and jingles and theme music throughout. This will save production time and create continuity.

10. Make it stick. Communication is about being understood. Learning takes communication one step further to ensure that what's been understood is remembered and applied to the real world. The key to good media learning content is structure and repetition. To make phenomenal audio learning content, structure your content carefully and employ creative repetition.

TOP TEN

web video

1. Only use video when it's the most effective method to convey your story. Video is good for action and content that is not heavy in detail or complexity. So if you can't tell most of your story with pictures, it's likely that audio or text may be more effective methods.

2. Think in terms of story and structure. Stories make sense of the world and when they are clearly organized and cleverly told, people follow them. So make sure you're not simply spewing out facts but are structuring your information in a way your viewer will quickly and easily understand.

3. Storyboard your video before you write your script or choose music and sound effects. What shots do you need? What camera angles? What backdrops? How will the actions in the pictures convey your message? Make sure all these questions are answered clearly in your storyboard. Storyboarding disciplines your thinking as a picture storyteller and saves time shooting and editing.

4. Plan everything. Shooting good video is very complex. There are more practical steps to take in creating video than there are recording audio for a podcast. So before you leave your office, plan everything. Plan who needs to be involved in the shoot, what equipment you need, how long you'll shoot for and whether you have permission to shoot in the location you are shooting.

5. Don't repeat the pictures in your commentary. Remember, pictures do the heavy lifting. Your commentary and dialogue exist to fill in the gaps and enrich the pictures.

6. Keep it short. There are so many different theories about whether web video should be short or run as long as a TV show does. And there's no doubt that the better the story, the longer someone will watch. However, we also live in a society where people twitter their thoughts in less than 140 characters. So my advice is to keep your video as short as your story will allow.

7. Get your shots right first. The really cool thing about the good video editing software is that you can do everything from color correction and picture cropping to chroma keying. The bad part of this is that it takes time. Too many people find themselves fixing poorly shot pictures in post production because the lighting was wrong or the audio settings were set incorrectly. Get it right the first time - that is when you shoot - and you'll save a load of time and money.

8. Avoid camera movement. Unless you want to be featured on amateur hour, think long and hard before using a pan, zoom, crab, tilt, track or other camera movement in your shot. Yes, camera movements are appropriate in some shots but more often than not they do not strengthen your story.

9. Be prepared. Planning is key to video production and so is preparation. Before you go out and shoot video make sure you have everything you need. You don't want to turn up and find you left your lapel mic at the office. Or discover you've run out of batteries.

10. Don't forget to exploit every opportunity video gives you to make your story more powerful. Of course that means making pictures your foundation. But don't forget music, sound effects, visual effects and spoken word also enrich your story when used carefully.